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Original Research Article

Methods to Achieve Psychological Resilience Among Workplace Bullying Victims

Maidaniuc-Chirilă Teodora

Post-PhD Fellow, SOP/HRD/159/1.5/S/133675 Project, Romanian Academy Iasi Branch.

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Psychological resilience is the process that allows individuals, families and human groups to overcome their difficult situations, trauma and psychiatric disorders and helps them to continue their lives as they did before or better by showing a better mental functioning as a result of post-traumatic personal growth (Wagnild, 2011; Ionescu, 2013). The present theoretical article discusses the psychological resilience implications for workplace bullying victims. The literature describes this phenomenon as being that situation in which a person perceived herself as being persistently exposed to negative acts displayed by one or more than one person in the work context (Chirilă & Constantin, 2013). The theoretical study presented in this paper discusses the efficiency of three methods used to achieve psychological resilience: writing practices, narrative practices and bibliotherapy. As a conclusion, the study discusses the efficiency of these three methods from the perspective of a training programme targeted to workplace bullying victims in order to help them achieve personal resilience.

Keywords: Psychological resilience, Workplace bullying, Writing practices, Narrative practices, Bibliotherapy.

INTRODUCTION

Resilience is needed by staff in organisations to cope with daily stress as well as to adapt to large-scale organisational change (Warner & April, 2012). Generally, psychological resilience is the process that allows individuals, families and human groups to overcome their difficult situations, trauma and psychiatric disorders and helps them to continue their lives as they did before or better by showing a better mental functioning as a result of post-traumatic personal growth (Wagnild, 2011; Ionescu, 2013). Applying this definition to workplace bullying cases, psychological resilience can be defined as being that process that allows targeted employees to overcome their difficult workplace situation and helps them to continue their professional lives as they did before or better by showing a better mental functioning as a result of post-traumatic personal growth.

The aim of the present paper is to review the literature in order to establish the place and the role of psychological resilience in the case of workplace bullying victims. Moreover, the paper presents and discusses the efficiency of three

methods (i.e. writing practices, narrative practices and bibliotherapy) used to achieve psychological resilience.

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE

The concept of being stretched and challenged, while being able to bounce back, is intriguing (Warner, 2007). It is attractive to individuals who would like to cope with life's daily problems and the bigger knocks that we all inevitably have to endure, as well as to employers who would like their workforce to be able to adapt and cope with organisational changes and difficulties (Warner & April, 2012).

Luthans and Youssef (2004) state that there is a general misconception that resilience is an extraordinary gift, a magical, mystical, rare capacity, a trait that results from only genetic variables. Masten (2001) describes resilience as a common adaptive human process, rather than a magical process applicable to a select few. Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) describe the process of resilience as being characterised by the ability to bounce back from negative

emotional experiences, and by flexible adaptation to the changing demands of stressful experiences.

Warner and April (2012) see resilience as that developed characteristic for dealing with negative and positive changes in life, accessible to all people on a daily basis, which distinguishes survivors (employing successful, regular adaptation, and drawing from internal and external sources of strength usually associated with the psychological concept of having a bi-local locus of control) from those who give in to life's struggles (often resulting in pathological, and normally negative, life-adjusting effects); both approaches have consequences for the individual.

In an organisational context, resilience has been described as having the capacity to bounce back from both overwhelming positive and negative adversity/changes, such as increased responsibility (Luthans and Youssef, 2004). In an organisational setting, Warner and April (2012) define resilience as the ability to remain task-focussed, productive and connected to the organisational mission, whilst experiencing tough times. This requires employees at all levels to have the necessary inner strength and resourcefulness to enable them to cope with the impact of commonly-experienced organisational large-scale change, such as new priorities, new leadership, new organisational strategies, major change initiatives, new technologies, mergers and downsizing (Warner & April, 2012).

In organisations, resilience is all about the ability to cope with extreme stress-provoking events without experiencing signs or symptoms of personal stress and building resilience in the workforce helps managers and employees to cope with adverse events, minimise the negative impact on performance (both individual and organisational performance) and keep people engaged and performing at their optimum (Warner, 2007).

The literature provides many ways in which psychological resilience can be achieved and provides steps which can guide a person to build her own psychological resilience. The most comprehensive guide shows 21 steps for achieving personal resilience such as recognising the environment's beauty, curiosity, authenticity, courage, creativity, learning and development capacities, expressing affection, humour, being open to changes, feeling and expressing gratitude, perseverance, pleasing yourself, being compassionate, expressing compassion for yourself, planning abilities, abilities to learn from others, being noble, being a person of action, enjoying the little things in life, being positive and maintaining a good relationship with the energies surrounding the existence on earth (Wagnild, 2011). All these steps represent, in fact, personal resources easy to access in difficult periods.

Research on resilience in the workplace has shown its benefit: resilient people are less likely to become mentally or physically ill during adversity (Siebert, 2005); experience overall more hope, optimism and are better able to cope with job demands (Fredrickson, 2001); are better able to get through tough times, such as job loss and economic hardship (Brooks and Goldstein, 2004); and are better able to learn new skills and knowledge when their existing set becomes outdated (Gorelick, Milton & April, 2004).

WORKPLACE BULLYING PHENOMENON AND ITS NEGATIVE IMPACT ON THE TARGETED EMPLOYEES

The workplace bullying phenomenon has been defined as being that situation in which a person is harassed, socially excluded or offended (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003) or being that situation in which a person perceives herself as

being persistently exposed to negative acts displayed by one or more than one person in the work context (Chirilă & Constantin, 2013).

The workplace bullying phenomenon appears often in highly competitive working environments (Salin, 2003), in those organisations which permit these types of behaviours or in those organisations in which these behaviours are seen as being a part of the leadership and management style (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). So far, the literature has evidenced that sectors such as academic, health, educational and services are at the highest risk to be exposed to these negative acts (Vartia, 2001; Salin, 2001; Einarsen et al., 2003) and its negative impact is reflected not only on an individual level but also on an organisational one (Chirila & Constantin, 2013).

At an individual level, research in the field has shown that workplace bullying victims reported physical symptoms such as sleep disorders, lethargy, headaches, skin irritation, generalised body pain, stomach pain and digestive disorders (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006; Lewis, 2006a; O'Moore, Seigne, McGuire & Smith, 1998b; Quine, 1999; Vaez, Ekberg & Laflamme, 2004). Furthermore, literature has evidenced that workplace bullying victims present also some psychological symptoms such as anxiety, irritability, resentment, anger, depression, concentration problems, lower levels of self trust, mental fatigue and low levels of personal energy (Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004; Bjorkvist, Ostrman & Hjelt-Back, 1994a; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997) and at a social level, workplace bullying victims present social withdrawal tendencies (Lewis, 2004).

At an organisational level, literature has evidenced that the workplace bullying phenomenon has negatively impacted on organisational financial loss. Several costs have appeared as a consequence of loss of personal identity, of absenteeism, turnover and recruitment processes (Pryor, 1997).

METHODS TO ACHIEVE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

Literature promotes a series of methods used to increase psychological resilience such as writing practices, narrative practices and bibliotherapy. These three methods are presented below and their relevance is discussed in the next sections.

Writing Method as a Treatment

Different aspects about writing as a psychological treatment have been investigated by Cooper (2002) in his doctoral thesis and show that there is a direct relationship between expression, risk factors and resilience (Ionescu, 2013). When the expressive level is high, the risk factors are reduced, thus expressing in words the emotions and feelings, positively influencing the resilience process.

As it was stated before, generally, workplace bullying victims experience lower levels of self trust and self-esteem, higher levels of doubt referring to their own work competencies, and higher levels of shame, guilt, anxiety and strain so that keeping a personal diary in which all of these feelings are expressed will probably positively influence the resilience process and this method can be easily practised during training programmes.

Writing as a treatment and somatic diseases. Pennebaker (1998) showed that naming all the feelings experienced during a difficult situation has a major impact on somatic functioning. According to the author, writing for 20 minutes in three or four sessions a day may lead to an improvement of the immunity

system (Ionescu, 2013). Writing about the stressful events also has an effect on asthma symptoms (Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz & Kaeli, 2009).

According to researchers in the field (Garmezy, 1991), writing about the painful experience helps with a large number of somatic diseases and often persons are advised to keep a diary in which they write about their physical and psychological pain, recovery process and their thoughts (Ionescu, 2013). This practice can be easily recommended also for workplace bullying targeted employees. In this way they can express, monitor and change the magnitude of negative feelings felt during workplace bullying manifestations.

Often workplace bullying victims are ashamed by their situation and won't talk with others about their difficult work situation and often they feel increased levels of work dissatisfaction and levels of well-being at work so that practising writing as a treatment may lead them to lower levels of work dissatisfaction and higher levels of subjective well-being.

Writing method and spiritual diseases. In spiritual disease cases, writing as a treatment method was used by Esquirol in 1836 (cited by Ionescu, 2013) in order to enter into the prisoner's mental universe and to detect dissimulation.

Writing as a treatment method is often used by American psychiatrists, but recently this practice has been adopted also by human resource psychologists and applied to those workplace bullying cases detected in their organisations.

Researchers in the field (Einarsen et al., 2003) have shown that the targeted employees often lose their trust in management and colleagues and will socially withdraw. Writing regularly about negative events experienced at work can help workplace bullying victims to better understand the phenomenon, to discover the intentions and motivations behind the negative acts of the aggressors and to adapt their behaviour when interacting with the aggressors, thus overcoming the phenomenon without developing major health problems.

Writing the trauma. The fear produced by the traumatic shock destabilises the person and requires a defensive rearrangement so that writing the trauma appears as a defense mechanism. Often the writing process is viewed as being protective, liberating and restorative. These three levels of writing can act not only separately but also simultaneously (Ionescu, 2013).

Writing the trauma produced by the workplace bullying phenomenon can help the targeted employees to start their own resilience process by employing one of the three types of writing strategies.

Writing during the shock: protective writing. The person affected by the traumatic event tries to recover through writing, which can take different forms such as letters, notes, fragments, journals, graffiti and essays. In this case, writing during the difficult periods represents a resistance act and reveals the person's desire to do something memorable. Writing represents a personal method in which the person ignores the pain and it can be easily employed in workplace bullying cases. The targeted employees can use the protective writing method in order to get through the difficult situation experienced at work and to redefine their personal identity.

Writing after the shock: liberating writing. Another type of writing is liberating writing, which is employed usually after the traumatic shock and helps the person to forget the difficult moments by expressing the negative feelings experienced during the event. Writing helps people to free themselves from the resentment, fear and confusing feelings appearing during the workplace bullying phenomenon.

Liberating writing represents a preliminary step towards the acceptance of the negative event experienced at work and allows employees to normally function at their workplaces.

The latent period and restorative writing. Many writers haven't confronted their trauma until they have arrived at the end of their professional career, a period in which they feel they have a strengthened ego and they can talk about their difficult professional periods (Ionescu, 2013).

This type of writing can be useful and easily employed for those mature employees who have for many years experienced the workplace bullying phenomenon and hadn't had the chance to talk about their negative feelings. Generally, mature employees feel they have nothing more to lose and they feel they can talk about their difficult periods and thus they can teach the younger employees how to act in such cases.

By employing these three types of writing, people start their resilience process and become better and stronger persons with strong moral beliefs and values.

Narrative Practices

Writing about self is used as a form of therapy in order to ameliorate the physical and psychological symptoms and to become a better person. Proffo (apud Ionescu, 2013) speaks about the intensive journal method. In this situation, the person receives a file divided into sections referring to personal dreams, work, family, loving relationships and their inner life. In this file, the person can write his thoughts for each section. These stories are read and commented on in groups, thus applying the feedback method. Clinical psychologists (Bonetti, Fraisse & Gaulejac, 1987) have used the writing about self method in the field of training.

Through this method, employees present their genealogy, their professional itinerary and their professional project. All these writing pieces are analysed using the instruments of clinical sociology. This method is widely used in Canada, especially in the field of social work, and can be efficiently used in case of the workplace bullying phenomenon. The targeted employees can use this method in their occupational therapy method in order to overcome the negative experiences encountered in their workplace settings.

Generally, workplace bullying victims end up by being confused, suspicious and mentally disturbed. They can't distinguish anymore what is right or wrong, is their part of the responsibility for the occurrence of the workplace bullying phenomenon. When taking into account the narrative practices used for workplace bullying victims, it is about what Ionescu (2013) defined as being the right word said during the therapeutic process and during the writing process.

Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy refers to the recovery process of finding inner peace through a reading process. Books become the mirror which helps persons to move beyond the present moment and to find innovative solutions to their daily problems, thus overcoming their difficult situations.

This method can be also applied to affected employees in order to help them overcome the workplace bullying phenomenon without major physical and mental health costs. Through reading not only can they forget their present condition, but also they can find innovative solutions to their workplace problems, thus becoming resilient and resourceful employees for their organisations.

CONCLUSIONS

The present theoretical papers reviewed the literature in the field of psychological resilience and workplace bullying in order to find a link between the two phenomena, emphasising the role of psychological resilience for workplace bullying cases. The relationship between psychological resilience and the workplace bullying phenomenon is discussed from a practical view, thus promoting useful ideas for future training programmes which can be developed by a human resources department interested in maintaining employees' health and productivity.

According to the present theoretical paper, a resilience training programme will help employees to have a clear idea of what they want to do, to build personal determination, to get through and succeed in difficult situations, to form relationships with people who will help towards success, to efficiently solve their problems along the way, to get better organised and to build personal confidence through easily employed methods such as the writing method, narrative practices and bibliotherapy.

These methods can represent useful instruments for training programmes designed to improve employees' levels of professional resilience.

If the training programme is designed not only to inform employees about the workplace bullying phenomenon, but also to develop professional resilience among targeted employees through useful strategies for employees, then these training programmes can be labelled as being efficient and helpful for employees and for the entire organisation.

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Maidaniuc-Chirilă Teodora, Post-PhD Fellow, SOP/HRD/159/1.5/S/133675 Project, Romanian Academy Iasi Branch.

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